

Helen interrupts Owl Man's shower ...

He called it *balneotherapy*, and it was one of Owl Man's favorite rituals of the day. Those precious moments in the shower—soaping, scrubbing and singing—never failed to refresh him. What did he sing? Well, sometimes he'd go all out for Rigoletto, favoring Sparafucile's part in *Bella figlia dell'amore*. Or he might intone one of the Scottish dirges he'd learned from Tully. Shower-time was also when he tuned in to his *owl-thoughts*, the bizarre images and intuitions that would swoop and swerve unexpectedly through the humid shower stall.

At the moment, he was singing 'Am Bròn Binn': "*Come lay your head on my knee, and I will play harp and sing for thee/She snatched the sharp sword from her—*" when he suddenly stopped. Then, cocking his head like a bird, he listened to a woman's voice emanating from the falling drops.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Have you forgotten again, Owl Man?"

Owl Man was indignant. "No, by God, I haven't forgotten a thing. The name of the ninth muse is Melpomene. Is that you, Helen?"

He strained to hear the voice, calm yet insistent, which came again through the sound of the water.

"Not the muses, Owl Man. The *gua*, the *gua*. You must consider how to come to terms with the second *gua*, Number 24, 'Turning Back.' And, yes, this is Helen."

Owl Man twisted the faucet knobs to OFF and reached for a towel as the shower fell silent.

"Isn't there a better place to talk about this, Helen?"

"Well, this is where I have the clearest, most direct access to your thoughts, Owl Man. The shower. This is where you do your best thinking, wouldn't you agree?"

"Hmmm. 'Spose you're right about that," conceded the Owl.

"Come on," said Helen's voice. "Dry off, get dressed and let's have a chat before Jasmine arrives. I want to make sure you and I are on the same page, lest we put our dear Jasmine in greater risk than she already is."

Several minutes later Owl Man and Helen were sitting at the table scribbling improvised renderings of the ten *gua* Owl Man had recently penned, with the help of the Agatha Christie.

“See, Owl, it’s this one,” said Helen. “Turning Back.”

“Why is that one so important?”

“Well, Owl Man, you’re the expert. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Sure, it’s obvious that I have to act in accord with the movements of heaven.”

“That’s correct. You have to act like a just ruler or king, fair to the people; thus, no crime is committed. But listen to this detail.” And here Helen repeated from memory: “‘*The subject’s actions show movement directed by accordance with natural order.*’ That’s what you just said, right? But now it says, ‘*He will return and repeat his proper course; in seven days comes his return: such is the movement of the heavenly revolution.*’”

“Yes,” murmured the Owl, “I see. I *had* forgotten that line. Seven days. A return.”

“Exactly, Owl Man. *That’s* why I had to interrupt your *owl-thoughts*. You must return in seven days or the heavenly order will be broken. I don’t have to tell you that would be a disaster. Seven days.”

“Do you mean—?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean.”

“In seven days I must confront Old Man Ling once again in his stronghold, so as not to break the heavenly order. But what’s the danger in that? Jaz and I already came and went without meaningful opposition.”

“The danger, Mr. Owl, is shown in the last line of the commentary: *The evil consequent on being all astray on the subject of returning is because the course pursued is contrary to the proper course for a ruler.*”

“But, Helen, I live my life according to the heavenly movements.”

“I know you do, Mr. Owl, I know. But that’s not how Shaman Song lives, which is by doing evil and *enjoying it*. He is the one who is ‘all astray’ on the importance that attaches to returning. That’s why there is so much danger afoot. Shaman Song operates with the distorted, herky-jerky movements of evil. He thinks he has scared you away with his silly “Pit of Doom” trick, but you and I know better. Now you must follow heavenly law in order for Song’s moral confusion not to prevail.”

“You’re saying, then, that I must return to the Rim of Fire in seven days, so that heavenly order may prevail.”

“Exactly. And he is the one that you, Jasmine and I must overcome—but at a time of our

choosing, not his. You see, Owl Man, *all three of us* must act in accord with the movements of heaven; otherwise, all is endangered.”

Thirty minutes later, when Jasmine came home and let herself in, Owl Man realized he'd been dozing. He could not recall his conversation with Helen, but he awoke with a burst of energy and a conviction about what they needed to do.

That Way Danger Lies...

Many are the threads out of which most stories are woven, whether there is an intentional pattern or not. But sometimes a character will complicate things in ways that break whatever pattern there may be, and at considerable inconvenience to the authors. Suddenly, everything becomes determined by the unexpected, and interwoven events change their course.

Such was the case with Fex, who, for some time now, had been making secret plans to start his own publishing empire, independently of Owl Man and Heron Man, his original “sponsors”—actually, his *creators*. Most alarming, perhaps, was the fact that Fex didn’t even consult Heather, and thus was running a considerable risk to his own well-being.

It was not *wise* of Fex to embark on a major venture without first consulting Heather. Owl Man had warned him many times: “*Hear my words, Fex: That way danger lies.*”

If the meaning of this saying is not obvious to the reader, perhaps we can illustrate the problem by recounting an earlier event that had—or *should have had*—a chastening effect on Fex.

The event in question took place at a time when planning for the heist was in one of its more intense phases. Heather and Sally were growing visibly more anxious and irritable. Heather snapped at Fex over inconsequential nothings, and Sally found fault with almost everything Sal said or did.

Fex had exhausted his limited repertoire of palliative moves and, in desperation, called Owl Man to ask for advice. After going over a brief checklist, Owl Man offered this diagnosis:

“I think, Fex, that you and Sal may be dealing with an acute case of what is professionally known as *fashion anxiety*. You won’t find this in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, of course. But I assure you it’s a real syndrome, and it has had adverse affects on untold numbers of lives. You and Sal are just two out of millions of partners—mostly men—suffering the spillover effects, the ‘collateral damage,’ as it’s called.”

“What the hell’s ‘fashion anxiety,’ Owl Man? It don’t seem possible. Are you talkin’ about clothes? Like my shirt is gonna bite me or somethin’?”

“Not quite, Fex, but you’re getting warm. Just think about it. Heather and Sally are about to embark on the biggest public performance of their lives. It’s huge, like the Academy Awards. And it’s even going to be filmed! So, quite naturally, Fex, they’re concerned about what they’re

going to wear.”

“What’s the big deal? They put somethin’ on and we do the heist.”

“Easy for you to say, Fex. Sure, you’ll put on a fresh Ascot and you’re ready to go. No fashion anxiety at all. But for Heather? For Sally? The choices are practically infinite. And you *do* want them to look their best, don’t you?”

“Sure I do, yeah, Owl Man. OK, I get it. But what do I *do* about it?” Fex posed the question triumphantly, as if he had just trumped Owl Man at poker or bridge. But Owl Man was unperturbed.

“It’s simple, Fex. You and Sal take Heather and Sally to the biggest mall you can find. Be prepared to spend the entire day. Be prepared to spend lots of money. And make sure you’ve got a tank full of patience, because you’re both going to need it.”

“Patience? Me? That’s a laugh.”

“I mean it, Fex. You’ve got to stuff it for a change. And there’s one last thing.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Keep your lip buttoned up. You can’t be popping off to Sal in front of the girls. And whatever you do, don’t go popping off to Heather and Sally. If you do, Fex, I guarantee you’ll be sorry in ways you can scarcely imagine.”

“That sounds like a threat, Owl Man. I don’t threaten easy.”

“It’s no threat, Fex. It’s the plain truth. You like the way Heather dresses, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I love it. She’s got class.”

“Well, you’re going to pay for that class, Fex. And you’re going to pay even more because—don’t forget—she’s got to dress like a Baroness.”

“OK, Owl Man. I hear ya. A regular Baroness.”

Fex uttered these last words in a tone at once confused, dejected and irritated. It was not in Fex’s nature to be patient, let alone to exercise towering self-restraint. And though he could be generous, he could also be unbelievably stingy.

This might easily prove to be a bigger test than either Fex or Sal could imagine.

Fex and Sal at the Mall ...

Having notified Sal in advance about the shopping plan, and having presented Owl Man's stipulations as if he, Fex himself, had thought of them, Fex then called a meeting at the houseboat. He wanted a proper, live audience of the principal players—Sal, Sally and Heather—to make his grand announcement about the big shopping excursion.

“So I said to myself, Heather and Sally both gotta look terrific for this heist, right? I mean, it's the biggest performance of their lives. Like the Academy Awards, right?”

“Hey, Fexie, you mean you understand what us girls are goin' through?”

“‘Course I understand, baby. Fex don't miss nothin', you know.”

Sally and Heather were both impressed with Fex's savvy, his sensitivity, how he understood their dilemma.

“OK, so here's the deal. I'm gonna take everybody to the Mall on Saturday. ‘Course, Sal's gonna pay for Sally, but I'm gonna drive the Lincoln. I think we got enough room, don't you, Sal?”

“Sure, me and Sally will sit in back and smooch, heh, heh.” And Sal grabbed Sally for the tenth time that morning.

“Hey, don't mess my dress, Sal. I'm in character.”

“You're what?”

“I'm in my Stanislavski character, like Owl Man said.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, sure.”

Sal was beginning to resent Stanislavski and his “stinkin' method.” He resented Sally's “character,” who didn't relish being grabbed like the real Sally did. He hated the constant rehearsing, hated having to improvise dialogue, hated his own character. He resented having to spend money on this frivolous, unnecessary shopping trip.

But Sal was smart enough to recognize the truth of what had, overnight, become Fex's Rule: Patience, patience, patience. Yes, Sal needed to be patient, for the underlying fact was this: If Heather and Sally were too anxious about their costumes, then they wouldn't be effective in their characters. And how could the heist go smoothly if two key players were frozen with stage fright?

So the four partners-in-crime piled into Fex's Lincoln, which leaped almost eagerly to

life, what with the new starter motor and flywheel Manny had installed.

They arrived at the immense mall—a modern Mecca for pious shopping pilgrims—shortly after opening time. Fex looked at his watch. It was 10:20 AM or 1020 hours, military time.

“Hey, Sal, let’s synchronize.”

Sal’s watch was a few minutes slow, so they synchronized their watches, just like in the old WWII commando movies Fex liked to watch.

In contrast, neither Heather nor Sally wore a watch today. They were on “shopping time” which, on the face of it, should have given Fex and Sal ample forewarning of what they were up against.

At first, both Fex and Sal tagged along with the two giddy girls, trying to maintain patriarchal control over the choices, both fashion-wise and money-wise. But after an hour or so they gave up. Finally they settled themselves on a bench where they could watch water splashing in a fountain, but only after having cleaned out the coins tossed there by many hopeful children making wishes. A few mothers scowled at the two shameless men scrambling after the loose change, laughing, sleeves soaking wet.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves,” one of the mothers admonished.

In a remarkable coincidence, Fex and Sal both looked at the huffing woman and simultaneously issued the same vulgar retort: “Fuck off, lady.”

With that the woman turned and dragged her child toward the ice cream concession.

“Mommy, what are those men doing?”

“They’re stealing, darling. They’re stealing little children’s money.”

“Can I steal some too, Mommy?”

The horrified mother gave her child another yank on the arm, and did not dignify the question with an answer.

Fex and Sal high-fived each other and sat down to count the change.

Having drifted over to the International Food Bazaar, Fex and Sal spent the afternoon sitting in front of the “Taquería Chipotle.” It was not long before their table was cluttered with debris from their lunch of *chimichangas*, *nachos*, *tacos* and *frijoles refritos*.

Fex was poking at the remaining, dried out tortilla chips, thinking about a cigar, when, at 1732 hours, military time, Heather and Sally rounded the corner of Mr. David’s Hair Emporium.

Fex's eyes bulged when he saw the packages they were carrying, or rather, were having transported. They had hired an off-duty stock boy from one of the stores to carry the entire load for them on a platform cart.

Heather walked up to Fex, sat on his lap and gave him a big kiss.

"Hey, baby, did you miss me?" Heather was nearly breathless.

"Yeah, baby, I sure did. And my bank account missed you too. How much did you spend?" In Fex's mind, he was restraining himself heroically, "buttoning it up," as Owl Man had warned. But in truth he hadn't even tried, and was failing miserably.

Heather looked at Fex, then at Sally. Any neutral observer would have seen the slow burn crawling across Heather's face like a lighted fuse creeping steadily toward a stick of dynamite.

"How much you think we spent, Sally? she said sarcastically.

"I don't know, Heather. We didn't buy very much." Sally was confused. She wasn't expecting Fex to grill them publicly, right there in the Food Bazaar, about how much they had spent.

Despite Owl Man's warning, and despite his own crumbling resolve, Fex kept shoveling, digging his own grave, like a condemned man eager for the hanging.

"Let's see the receipts," he insisted unwisely. Sal tried to signal Fex, first holding his finger to his lips, then frantically drawing his finger across his throat, but with no success.

Fex had backed himself into some mental ditch that he couldn't get out of. He was stuck, and everyone knew it.

Sally compliantly gathered the receipts and gave them to Sal to tally up, while Heather smoldered.

After Sal had run the numbers in his head, the total came to just over four thousand dollars.

"Four grand? Are you kiddin' me? That's probably more than we're gonna get from the heist. I can't believe you'd spend—"

And so Fex was off to the races. He had indeed "unbuttoned" his lip injudiciously, and reckless words spilled out. His fate was sealed.

Heather stood up suddenly and towered over Fex, who was still sitting down, like a pasha in his tent counting gold. She almost seemed to be rearing up like an enraged racehorse, front hooves striking the air, intent on trampling a hated stable boy.

“Well, fuck you, then, Fex. You can take your fucking heist and shove it.” She grabbed the receipts from Sal’s hand and threw them in Fex’s face.

As if on cue, Sally followed suit and yelled at Sal, though he had kept his mouth shut throughout the confrontation. Her shout reverberated across the food bazaar as stunned customers, enjoying their corn-dogs, fries and slurpees, froze in mid-bite in order to stare at the dramatic ruckus unfolding before them.

“C’mon, Sally, we’re takin’ a taxi!” fumed Heather.

She had just told Fex what to do with his heist, but she was not so outraged as to return the clothes. She ordered the embarrassed stock boy to wheel their goods outside to a taxi stand. Then she and Sally solemnly marched ahead of the laden cart like firing-squad soldiers marching to an improvised execution. The sharp reports of their high heels echoed through the great hall like snare drums.

And then they were gone.

For the next ten minutes Fex struggled to repair his ruined self-esteem, cover up his colossal error and make a case for his innocence.

“What did I say?” Fex said repeatedly to Sal. “What did I say? Did I say anything? I didn’t say nothin’.”

Sal sat there stoically. He knew Fex was beyond reach of reason. And when Sal finally did speak, it was only to bring the unfortunate incident to a close.

“Fex,” he said morosely, “you and your big fuckin’ mouth.”

Mopping up ...

It took many emergency interventions by Owl Man, Heron Man, Coo—even Foxy, not usually known for diplomacy—to bring the two estranged couples back together. Once a tenuous truce had been established, still more meetings were required to get the preparations for the heist back on track. Owl Man took Sally and Heather aside for one-on-one coaching sessions, trying valiantly to re-ignite the Stanislavski spirit in these two critical members of the cast. Several times he asked Sally to sing, a recourse for which he was grateful. The effects of her singing were always beneficial.

For his part, Heron Man engaged Fex, Sal and Coo with diversionary tactics. One night, for example, he took them to an expensive bar and treated them to a taste ‘tour’ of fine Scotch whiskies. Glasses crowded the table as the bartender brought out, from under lock and key, round after round of his most expensive labels—Glenfiddich Single Malt, Lagavulin, Macallan Fine, Chivas Regal.

Heron Man didn’t really know anything about Scotch, but he had learned a few things from Owl Man and decided that Stanislavski would understand the need of the occasion. So, he stepped into character and held forth as if he were an expert on Scotch, even putting on a little brogue after they had all gotten tipsy. He told them of his Scottish ancestry, which was technically true, though in real terms it was a stretch, if not a lie.

His aim was to get their attention off of Fex’s recent blunder and the punishment Heather and Sally had been meting out ever since. He wanted to loosen them up, to massage their emotional muscles, so to speak. After this brief shore-leave of whiskey-soaked R & R, then, they could re-focus their attention on the task at hand: relieving Old Man Ling of at least some of his possibly ill-gotten gains.

That night they left the bar arm-in-arm, imbued with *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, singing campfire and hiking songs into the damp, overcast Seattle night sky.

The next morning they all woke up with hangovers, naturally, but the metabolic remorse this created did, in fact, serve to speed the reconciliation with Heather and Sally.

Fex Wants to Write . . .

As time went on, preparations for the heist seemed more and more to be on hold. Or were they fizzling out? Or going astray? In any event, Fex impatiently continued his secret plot to try his hand at the writing-and-publishing business, in lieu of the heist. He never had believed in the two “bird-brains” and their ability to facilitate his and Sal’s plans at Ling Bank anyway—or so he claimed. (Coo, as usual, didn’t count.) Fex would launch his new career by doing some writing on his own, then, once he’d gotten a head of steam going, he would interview the two novelists at Tully’s.

“If them bird-brains can do it, so can I,” he reasoned.

Fex and Sal were halfway through their beer and burgers at the Fulton Bar and Grill, down the street from Tully’s. Fex had sent Coo on some long errand, but he liked an audience when he ate, so he summoned Sal, maneuvering him into springing for the burgers. As for Sal, he had been fidgety lately, and now having to deal one-on-one with Fex just made him more nervous. But Fex had demanded the meeting, and would not be denied.

“Hey, Sal,” Fex began, after swallowing most of a burger patty, “you seen them bird-brains lately?”

“Which bird-brains, Fex?”

“Who else, idiot? Owl Man and Heron Man. What other bird-brains do we know?”

“Coo, maybe?”

”Hah hah, yeah, he’s got one all right—a pigeon-brain, ‘fya ask me.”

“How come yer askin’, Fex?” asked Sal, his eyes flitting back and forth.

Fex took a couple of paper napkins and wiped some ketchup off his cheek and neck.

“I decided I’m gonna write this fuckin’ heist myself, since our two bird-brains don’t seem to be able to get it up long enough to pull it off.”

“But we been practicin’ their transportal re-positioning, Fex, divin’ down the bird’s throat and all that witch-doctor stuff. Are you givin’ that up”

“Maybe so, maybe not. I ain’t decided yet. Maybe I can just pull off two heists ‘stead of one. Besides, I been watchin’ these two feather-heads, and it obviously don’t take no Einstein to do this writin’ shit. Just a little thinkin’, which I do a lot of anyway. Fact is I already done some writin’, Sal, and I’m gettin’ pretty good at it. Wanna see?”

“What? Ain’t that kinda dangerous, Fex?”

“Whaddya mean ‘dangerous’? I could take both of ‘em single-handed.”

“No, I mean, what if you screw up the ... the ... you know, the *reality* of the thing.”

“There ain’t no reality to screw up, Sal, it’s all bullshit.”

“Sure, Fex, sure, it’s just bullshit. No Ling Bank, no Jolene, no Lincoln—no Heather.”

“Hey, keep your friggin’ mitts off my Heather.”

“I didn’t touch her, Fex, I’m just sayin’. What if the reality thing gets screwed up ‘cause you messed with it?”

“What the hell are you worried about, Sal? Look, I been practicin’, okay? I’ll do somethin’ right now.”

And with that, Fex hauled out the spiral notebook he’d been using, along with a Number Two pencil. He opened the notebook with a flourish, to a blank page.

“Now watch. This is gonna be a cinch, Sal. Get this.”

Fex put the pencil to his tongue, swooped his hand in the air, made a face and began writing. He sounded out the words and letters as he wrote.

“‘Owl Man walks—no—he steps in ... in some ... some dog-shit then he ... walks into the hamburg- joint.’ Hey, Sal, how do you spell ‘burger’?”

“B-u-r-g—oh, hell, Fex, look at the menu if you don’t know how to spell ‘burger.’”

“I know how to spell it, fer Christ’s sake. I just forgot.”

As Fex was about to resume his sentence, the door opened and a gust of cold air entered the bar. Before either man could identify the new arrival, they both heard the familiar voice.

“Hello, Fex, Sal. What a pleasant surprise. May I join you?”

Sal’s face suddenly took on an ashen appearance. Fex turned around just as Owl Man pulled up a chair.

Fex and Sal both seemed confused.

“Don’t let me interrupt, Fex. Say, isn’t that a writer’s notebook I see?”

“What? Oh, yeah, it’s just a little thing I’m doin’. A little writin’ on my own.” Fex covered the page with his hand. He didn’t want Owl Man to see the part about stepping in the dog-sh—

“Wonderful, I’d love to read some of your work.”

Momentarily, the three cohorts paused and sniffed the air before Fex continued.

“Well, I ain’t really done yet, I just—I was just showin’ Sal how it works.” Fex seemed half-embarrassed, half-proud.

“Really! This is fascinating, Fex. I’m sure you have great talent. Just how does it work?”

“Well, it’s pretty easy,” said Fex, warming to the topic. “See, I just wrote you walkin’ down the sidewalk—heh heh—and steppin’ in, I mean, walkin’ into this here burger joint, and here you are, heh heh. See?”

“Interesting, Fex, very interesting indeed,” said Owl Man slowly. “And have you done any work on the heist, by any chance? Sketched out any scenarios, written any backstories?” Owl Man pulled out his laptop and opened it up.

“Hey, Owl Man,” cried Sal, “don’t do nothin’ with that computer. It might screw up Fex’s thing.”

“Fex’s thing?” repeated Owl Man.

“Yeah, you know, the thing he’s writin’.”

Owl Man sniffed the air again, looked down at his shoe, then typed something on the laptop.

The tainted air seemed to clear immediately, the animal odor now replaced with the fragrance of *poet’s jasmine*.

“Hi, Owlie, did somebody call?” It was Jasmine.

She gave Owl Man a peck on the cheek, then looked around the table. “What are we having, boys,” she asked, “a writing contest?”

“No,” shouted Sal.

“Yes,” said Fex and Owl Man simultaneously.

“Fex and I are collaborating, my dear, putting our heads together in a little experiment, you might say,” said Owl Man, cool as always.

Jasmine grinned and turned away. When Owl Man looked back at Fex, he saw the florid face scrunched up like a bulldog’s. Fex was hunched over his spiral notebook and the pencil was tilting rapidly across the page. When he finished, he slapped the notebook closed and leaned back with a satisfied air.

“Hey, Sal,” he demanded, “run down to Dunkin’ Donuts and get a mixed dozen, will ya?”

Then he turned toward Owl Man and, chuckling maliciously to himself, he gave Owl the beady eye.

Before Sal returned, Fex, still chuckling, said to Owl Man, “See there, bird-brain? It works both ways!”

Fex Interviews Owl Man and Heron Man ...

The next day, Jasmine was the only one behind the counter at Tully's, drawing a double espresso and steaming a latte when Fex, Coo, Owl Man and Heron Man came marching in together, single-file, but with Fex in the lead. They all sat at the four-seat booth in the south-west corner for a conference, as if they were going to draw up a post-war accord, or something just as formal.

Fex's decision to become a writer-publisher was based on two factors: first, he figured it would be "a breeze"; and second, he would make "a bundle" at it. For these reasons, his interview with Owl Man and Heron Man would deal with the new "so-called" book they had just published: *Dreams, Bones & the Future: A Dialogue*.

As usual, Fex waved his arms in grand gestures, his well-coiffed pompadour practically dripping with fragrant pomade, and he quickly took the initiative. Before starting, however, he took a sip of coffee, cocking his pinky finger delicately in mid-air as he did so, like a proper Englishman at tea-time.

"Ahem," Fex said, calling the meeting to order. So—Coo here tells me you two bird-brains been writin' another one of your so-called books. Probably a big waste of my time even to talk about it. But be that as it may, what makes you think it's such a big deal? Why should I bother readin' it?" (This was Fex's idea of a "hard-hitting" publishing interview.)

"Well, Fex," said Owl Man, unperturbed as usual, "as a matter of fact it's more of a "dialogue" than a normal—"

Fex interrupted, holding up his hand as if stopping a bank robbery in progress. "See? I told ya it was gonna be bullshit. Typical Owl Man voodoo-shit. What I really mean is, why should I bother buyin' it?"

Owl Man replied: "Actually, Fex, you don't have to buy a copy, we'll *give* you one. And if you'd just shut up for a minute maybe you'd learn something about it.

"Yeah, yeah," said Fex, suddenly full of hail-fellow-well-met good humor. "OK, bird-brain, OK," he chuckled. "I'm just teasin'. Go ahead with your spiel, but it better be good."

It wasn't long, before Owl Man was just "droning on," in Fex's view. Therefore, a colossally-bored Fex began drifting off to more interesting places—a series of fantasies about the big publicity splash he would make when he finally entered the publishing "racket.

Fex's Publicity Fantasy #1 ...

Major New Publishing Startup Announced

by Fannie Earwiggle, Staff Writer

June 21, 2015 (CNN) Tully's Coffee Shop in Seattle was the scene today of an impromptu and chaotic news conference in which a major new publishing start-up was announced at the very epicenter of Amazon's monopoly. The announcement was formally made by Veronica Whitehorst Cerrvaggio, the CEO of Cerrvaggio Acquisitions, a firm specializing in takeovers of businesses that attract little or no interest on Wall Street.

In this case, the target firm was Fex & Coo Publishing House, a start-up that has no business history, no working capital and, as far as anyone could discern, little or no promising future. However, with Cerrvaggio Acquisitions funneling undisclosed amounts of capital into the venture, one may look forward to Ms. Cerrvaggio's magic to once again bring bright lights to an unpromising prospect. When asked about how Fex & Coo Publishing House imagined making any headway in Amazon's backyard, Mr. Fex said that the basis of its success would be "indifference to the usual rules of success," beginning with its first publication entitled, *Artless Visionary Projection*, a 64-page volume of blank pages and one-page of instructions, on how to project visions in an artless manner.

Fex's Publicity Fantasy #2 ...

TRANSCRIPT OF JED FLIGHBANITER'S INTERVIEW WITH MARIA
LIPSAROMO

—Evening Edition AP Newswire headline:

Veteran Wall Street Traders Say It's Unprecedented!

JF: “Old-timers up and down Wall Street say they’ve never seen anything like it, Maria. I’m referring of course to the three simultaneous, coordinated flash mobs that descended on the trading floor of the NYSE, Goldman Sachs, and Tully’s Coffee Shop in downtown Seattle, where earlier today the first news of a major publishing event was released to a largely unsuspecting public. The event, of course, was the launching of the Fex & Co Publishing House—not a subject for your usual Wall Street publicity firestorm. Maria, perhaps you can put this phenomenon into perspective for our viewers.”

ML: “Sure, Jed, I’d be glad to. First, keep in mind that Goldman Sachs, using its considerable financial heft, scored a major coup by elbowing Cerrvaggio Acquisitions out of position and taking over the release of the surprise IPO. That’s why Sachs was the target of one angry flash mob of protestors complaining that all IPO shares had been parceled out to insiders, leaving the average trader to grasp at skyrocketing share prices that, at one point, reached nosebleed levels for a company flirting with a P/E ratio of 3000 to 1.”

JF: “That’s incredible, Maria.”

ML: “It is, Jed. You’d have to go back to the Dutch tulip craze of the early-seventeenth century to find a comparable mania.”

JF: “But isn’t this just another ho-hum publishing venture? Hardly a mania, I’d say, Maria.”

ML: “Ordinarily I’d agree with you, Jed. But you’ve got to remember that the CEO of the Fex & Co Publishing House—which is the center of the cyclone, as it were—is no ordinary Jamie Dimon, or Lloyd Blankfein-type numbers-cruncher. I think you’d have to call him *a visionary*. And, by the way, he goes by one moniker: Fex.”

JF: “What about the other half of this dynamic duo, Maria, this ... uh, let’s see ... yes,

here it is—Mr. Coo?”

ML: “You can forget about him, Jed. Fex is the brains of the outfit, which he is not shy to tell you. That’s one reason why this otherwise dull non-event is generating so much excitement, even if some of it is bitter. I mean, for example, 27 protestors were arrested today at the NYSE for disturbing the peace. And Seattle—well, Seattle practically shut down for the day. SWAT teams and riot police were out in force trying to maintain order.”

JF: “Well, let me ask you this, Maria. Word on the street has it that the FCPH, as it’s now being referred to—and I’m quoting the prestigious Fannie Earwiggle here—‘ ... has no business history and no working capital and as far as anyone could discern little or no promising future.’ With publicity like that, can’t we just say that people have gone slightly bonkers?”

ML: “Well, Jed, if the market were rational and efficient, I might agree with you. But, once again, I have to remind you that when a CEO with aim-for-the-stars charisma comes along, and takes the gloves off, to borrow from Donald Rumsfeld, then let’s say that *the sky’s the limit*.”

JF: “Sounds like you’ve become a believer, Maria.”

ML: “I have, Jed, I have. I’ve looked into Fex’s eyes and I see nothing but glory there. And as for that 3000-to-1 P/E ratio, don’t let that stop you from hopping aboard this unstoppable freight train. I fully expect that within a year the P/E will hit a minimum of 40,000-to-1.”

JF: “Wow. That’s some prediction, Maria. Let’s hope you’re right.”

ML: “There will be lots of champagne corks popping on the Street in the upcoming months, Jed. *And you can take that to the bank*.”

JF: “Unfortunately, Maria, we’ve run out of time in this segment. Thank you so much for joining us, Maria Lipsaromo, and giving us your *View From the Street*. For AP Newswire, I’m Jed Flighbaniter.”

Fex Takes Command ...

“It’s like I been sayin’ all along, these two big-shot bird-brains don’t know nothin’ about nothin’,” said Fex, for about the hundredth time in a tenth as many days.

The scene was a local bar, not far from Fex’s houseboat, called *The Spouter Inn*, a whaling name taken from Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Fex sat in a corner talking to a bunch of heavy-drinking alkies he’d been treating to free booze, and spouting off his opinions like a land-locked whale, though in Fex’s case his color was mostly pink—apologies to Melville and his White Whale.

An acute observer might have begun to think that Fex, by voicing the same derogatory opinion over and over, was compensating for some inferiority. Fortunately for Fex, there were no acute observers around, only the crew of imbibing free-loaders who followed him around, all of whom were only too happy to consume the drinks Fex was only too happy to buy for them, so long as they adhered to certain unspoken rules—that they listen to him in a courteous and rapt manner, or pretend to, and that they do so without interruptions.

With the ever-loyal Coo by his side, Fex had been expanding his sphere of influence in the watering holes near the marina where the *Come Ye Heather* was moored. He was becoming so popular, that a couple of times he had even floated the possibility of running for political office, and like all politicians, he wanted to sound the waters first. “Run it up the flagpole, kinda thing,” he said shyly. “Hell, if the Boner can do it, I can do it.” That was as far as he took it, though.

Heather wasn’t interested in standing next to Fex while he gave political speeches about taxation and the evils of government, Sally only cared what Sal did, and Sal was preoccupied with a “software problem” he and Jolene were working on after hours. Coo, well, Coo didn’t figure into Fex’s political calculations because he could be taken for granted.

Although booze was the real driving force behind the cohesiveness of the group following Fex around from bar to bar, it must be said that he did occasionally show flashes of entertaining brilliance, especially in the way he could tell one salacious joke after another when he was sufficiently liquored up.

“D’I ever tell you about the time this dame with the big hooters come up to me?”—was a typical opening, then off he would go. The free-loaders, similarly liquored up, had no trouble at

all following the twists and turns of Fex's flashes of brilliance, and by the end of the joke they would be rolling off their chairs or stools in laughter, holding out their glasses for more booze.

"Johnny!" Fex would shout to the bartender. "Set up another round for the boys!" And Johnny would dutifully fill the glasses, keeping careful track, naturally, of every drop served. But Fex never complained when Johnny slipped him the tab as they all left. Whatever it cost was well worth it to Fex. For the truth was, though he could not admit it, that he *missed* the two bird-brains since they had been off doing other things, and had "temporarily" put the heist on hold. The fact was that the novel, which Owl Man once referred to—speaking to Fex—as 'your book,' gave a substance to Fex's life that bar-hopping with his gang of free-loaders never would.

Only in his weakest moments would Fex ever admit to "missing" anyone or anything. That was a box he kept tightly locked and well-hidden. And so he entertained his well-lubricated, spellbound audience with his theories, critiques, risqué jokes and such. Little by little, however, his circle of listeners grew, despite the distilled incentives. And Fex grew more and more careless with the information and opinions he was spreading around.

One evening, while Heather was out shopping with Sally, Fex was coming out of the men's room at the dirt-bag Spouter Inn, when a stranger wearing an overcoat and a crushable canvas fedora-style hat, approached him and said, "Hey, mister. Ya gotta light?" Fex, relieved from having relieved himself, had not lost his expansiveness.

"Yeah, sure, I gotta light. What're ya smokin'?"

"Got this little cheroot, here."

But when Fex held out his lighter to ignite the cheroot, the man took his hand and squeezed it tighter than Fex expected, and didn't let go.

"Hey, what gives?" said Fex, uncertain about the message the man was sending.

"Relax, pal. I just wanna talk to ya for a minute. You know, you got some pretty good moves on you. Didya know that?"

The compliment worked wonders and Fex relaxed.

"Hey, yeah, I been workin' on some stuff, ya know."

"Yeah, I heard about what you're workin' on."

"Oh ya? What's that?" Now Fex was more cautious. He liked broadcasting his business, but paradoxically, he didn't like people *knowing anything about his business.*"

"Oh, you know, just rumors. Talk. Maybe some action comin' down. Somethin' I might

be interested in. Help out a little. I got some connections.”

“Yeah? What connections?” Fex was getting suspicious again.

“Nothin’ ta worry about, pal. Just somethin’ might increase your take, like about a hundred percent, is all.”

Now Fex was definitely interested, but he wasn’t about to relinquish control.

“Maybe I’m interested, maybe I ain’t. But let’s get one thing clear. I’m in charge of this here thing. All the way. You got that?”

“Sure, I got it, pal. No problemo. You’re the boss-man, like they say. You run the show, all the way.” Then the stranger turned away.

“Hey,” said Fex. “What’s your name?”

“Name’s Tony. Call me Tone. I’ll be in touch. I know where you live.” With that the man slipped out of the hallway, walked quickly through the bar and out the front door.

Fex remained behind, in the narrow hallway outside the john, repeating to himself, “I’m the boss. I’m in command here. All the way, like he said. All the way.” Then Fex hurried back to the *Come Ye Heather*.

When Heather came home, Fex was in bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Hey, baby, wanna see the stuff I got?” said Heather.

“Na, maybe later,” answered Fex. “Gotta little stomach thing.”

Fex didn’t say anything for the rest of the evening. Heather came to bed and went right to sleep, but Fex’s eyes were open all night.

The Noose Tightens ...

The day after Heather's latest shopping trip with Sally, and Fex's encounter with the stranger needing a light, Fex spent the entire day in bed.

"Whatsa matter, baby? Does Fexie have a bad tummy t'day?" Heather always cared for Fex with magnitudes of sympathy.

"Yeah, musta picked up somethin'. Maybe it was them mussels I ate, or the clams 'n' shrimp." The kitchen at *The Spouter Inn* had been red-flagged more than a few times for health-code violations, so it provided a convenient excuse. Fex was not about to tell Heather about the stranger. He needed to work this out on his own. The stranger had not figured at all into his plan to take charge, so he spent the day devising fall-back positions, counter-attacks, and even worked out some welcome-aboard, come-one-come-all grandiosities, which he was inclined to do anyway, at least on the surface.

But Fex knew that with the advent of this stranger, and that first, innocent striking of Fex's lighter-flint, a fire may have been started that he might not be able to put out.

As if in confirmation of his fears, no sooner did he imagine flames leaping overhead than there came a knock at the door. Heather had gone shopping again, and Fex was alone. For a minute he wondered whether to answer it or not. But the rapping continued, and did not seem likely to stop.

Pulling on his bathrobe, stepping into his slippers, Fex rubbed his face and felt the heavy growth of whiskers that had been covering his face the whole time he'd been "under the weather." There were dark bags under his eyes and he knew he looked like he had a hangover. In fact, that's exactly how he felt—hung-over.

The knocking continued.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'," shouted Fex, as he shuffled reluctantly toward the door, his hands involuntarily forming fists.

As the door swung open, Fex felt a momentary jolt in his bowels. Not only was he confronted by the very same stranger he was beginning to fear, but the latter was flanked by two Chinese weight-lifters with necks as thick as the oaks of Sherwood Forest—*before* they mowed them down to build the "Robin Hood Condos." Obviously they were bodyguards, though whom they were guarding Fex could not say. They seemed too much like overkill to serve as protection

for “Tony,” the smooth and oily one, always with the glad hand and the sly smile.

“Hey, there, bro, good to see you,” said Tone. “Mind if we come in for a minute?” And the stranger pushed his way past Fex and walked into the tiny living room as if he owned the place. The two bodyguards also pushed past Fex, though not as smoothly as the stranger. The three of them occupied most of the standing room, leaving Fex at the door in his robe and slippers, and for the briefest moment he considered slamming the door and running for help, though he couldn’t say where that help would come from.

“Come on in, Fex. You remember me? Tony? Tone? These are my two associates. Told ya I had connections, didn’t I?”

This was one of the few occasions in his life where Fex was at a loss for words. The stranger seemed to be in complete control.

“Thought we oughta go meet some more of my connections, ‘fore you get too far with your plans.” “But,” was as much as Fex could manage.

“Hey, no problem, pal. Like I said before, you’re in charge. You the man, right?”

“Uh—”

“Anyway, this here’s Ching and this here’s Chong. Least that’s what I call ‘em. Kinda funny how that worked out, eh?”

And before he knew what was happening Ching and Chong had grabbed Fex by the elbows, lifted him off the ground, and carried him up the dock-ramp to a waiting black limo that sat there with its huge engine idling like a sewing machine. They stowed him in back and sat on each side of him, like in old gangster movies. The stranger, “Tone,” sat in front next to a silent Chinese driver.

“Just take a minute, pal. My boss has some questions for ya, ‘fore we get too far with this ... contract.”

“Wait a minute—” Fex started to say, but Ching jabbed his stiff fingers under Fex’s lower ribs and pulled them out sharply, taking Fex’s breath away in the process.

“Uumphhh!” Fex gasped.

But just as his breath was coming back Ching and Chong were carrying Fex out of the limo and up the back-entry staircase of Ling Bank, directly into the dragon’s lair—Old Man Ling’s back office. By this back route, they had avoided detection by Sal, Jolene, and all the other tellers and customers on the front floor. Even old Joe, the security guard, had no idea they

were there.

Having forced Fex into a hardwood chair with no arms, placed directly in front of Old Man Ling's desk, on which the customary cigarette was burning and dropping ashes on the glass desk-cover, the bodyguards stood on either side of Fex and waited as Old Man Ling himself looked at some papers on the desk. Then he leaned back in his sumptuous leather swivel chair and closed his eyes, as if asleep. This was a characteristic posture for Old Man Ling, something he often did. He liked people to guess what he was doing.

Fex had the feeling that, though Ling's eyes appeared to be closed, he was in fact intently scrutinizing every feature of Fex's unshaven face—and, we might as well say it, Fex's "unshaven soul"—for no one who ran an empire as big as Ling did, or Jee Besus, for that matter, could do so without possessing a certain insight into character. Still, Fex didn't really know if the old man was awake or asleep, until Ling opened his mouth wide and sneezed, blowing ashes all over Fex's bathrobe.

Chong hastened to hand his boss a brand-new, white-silk handkerchief to dab his mouth with. Ling dropped it on the floor and Chong picked it up immediately and stuck it in his back pocket.

"So," said Ling. "We meet. Two big shot. Mistah Fex, they call you. And Mistah Ling they call me—to face. Old Man Ling to back. Oh, I know, don't bothah me. But—if call me that to face—I chop head off. Ain't no question. Now. What you gonna call me, Mistah Big Shot Fex?"

"Oh, ain't no question, I call you Mistah Big Shot Ling."

It was quite unfortunate that, under the present circumstances, Fex didn't have more presence of mind or more control of his tongue, than to unconsciously begin imitating Old Man Ling's speech patterns without intending to.

"No!" shouted Old Man Ling as he slammed his fist on the desk-top, making the glass ash-tray jump, and ashes fly, for probably the fortieth time that week. Both Ching and Chong grabbed Fex from the side and squeezed his neck until it seemed his carotid arteries would pop from the pressure.

Old Man Ling's voice quivered with rage as he shouted, "You no call me that! You call me Mistah Ling, or you not live five minute!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ling, Mr. Ling. I didn't mean to say that. I ain't feelin' too good today

and—”

“Stop complain!” shouted Ling again. Once he began shouting at someone, he seemed to draw strength from it. He was legendary in most of the back rooms of Seattle, especially Chinatown, for his temper.

The interview went on in this manner for close to twenty minutes—Ling subjecting Fex to the Mother of All Harangues, Fex sitting in the hardwood chair, taking it; “Tone” sitting off to the side cleaning his fingernails; Ching and Chong standing beside Fex, punching and buffeting him occasionally as if they were Old Man Ling’s punctuation marks.

At one point, Shaman Song even stuck his head in the door—a rare event, since Ling usually held his audiences with Shaman Song at the Rim of Fire. In this case, Song saw what was happening, heard the rising tenor of Ling’s quavering voice, and quietly slipped back out of the office. Whatever was bothering the wily Shaman could wait.

Once Ling had calmed down, and Fex was properly subdued, the conversation took a radically different turn. Ling suddenly began pushing spread-sheets bulging with numbers across the desk to Fex and firing mathematical questions at him, as if he expected Fex to understand them.

There was little Fex could do but nod, say “Uh huh,” and “Yeah, but,” in an effort to slow down the conversation. But in the end, all he could do was sign the contract Ling pushed in front of him, after which Ching and Chong signed their names in Chinese characters, as witnesses to the transaction.

At the end of the day, “Tone,” along with Ching and Chong, dumped off Fex in a heap at the top of the dock-ramp and drove off in the limo. With difficulty, Fex pulled himself to his feet and staggered down the ramp to the *Come Ye Heather*. He opened the door and called out for Heather, but she was still not home. When she finally arrived an hour later, however, Fex was as drunk as she had ever seen him.

Jee Besus calls Clamface ...

Shortly after midnight on June 22nd, Amazonz founder and CEO Jee Besus summoned his Chief of Security, Joe “Clamface” MacFee, to his (Besus’) penthouse office overlooking Elliott Bay.

Besus was reclining in his padded Corinthian leather swivel chair, his fingers steepled, a pensive look on his face. *He looks like one of them angels*, thought Clamface, as he entered the vast room.

“What’s up, boss?” said Clamface, not one for formalities.

“Thanks for coming, Clamface. I know it’s late. You’ll be wanting to get home to Gevildavish.”

Whenever Besus took this long to get to the point, Clamface knew something was wrong, and began to get nervous.

“Aw, no problem, boss. Gimme his name and I’ll take care of him.”

“If only it were that simple, Clamface, if only that simple. No, I’m afraid we’ve got to move more tactfully than we may have in the past.”

“Hmph,” replied Clamface, not sure what his boss was really saying.

“I need absolute secrecy and trust on this one, Clamface,” said Besus, sitting up straighter and pulling his chair to the desk. He stabbed the desktop with his index finger for emphasis.

“We’ve got to nail this bastard, and nail him good. But nobody can find out about it. Understood?”

“Sure, boss, yeah, I get it. That’s how I always work. It’s always an accident, ain’t it?”

“Yes, you’ve done well for the firm. But we need to move slowly on this one. There’s too much attention, too many beady little eyeballs on the lookout. This Fex bastard is threatening all my plans, everything I’ve labored for over the decades.”

“You mean that *schmuck* that thinks he can go up against Amazonz?”

“That’s the one, Clamface. The very one. Oh, I know he’s just a blowhard, a clown, but somehow he’s bringing some serious heat into the neighborhood. First that Cerrvaggio bitch, and now the entire IPO floor at Goldman Sachs, run by my arch-rival Lenny Duds. Wouldn’t *he* love to bring me down?”

“What? Why would he wanna do that, boss?” said Clamface, who was not gifted with an

appreciation for nuance.

“Because he hates my guts, Clamface!” shouted Besus, slamming the ten-foot-long, three-inch-thick teak desktop with his fist.

Besus, struggling visibly to regain control, finally succeeded.

“Ahem. Sorry, Clamface,” Besus apologized. Then he continued.

“Here’s what I need you to do.”

“Name it, boss. You just name it and Clamface’ll do it, boss—”

He was about to continue but Besus cut him off. “OK, OK, Clamface, that’s enough! I want you to go down to this ... this ... Tully’s dump in the morning—”

“You mean the coffee shop, boss?”

“Yes, I mean the coffee shop, and would you please stop calling me ‘boss’? Just go there. I think that’s where they hang out. There’s a whole pack of them, I hear. And Fex isn’t even the worst of them. Apparently he’s just the front man for two mobsters that are controlling the whole racket, Owl Man and Heron Man—not bad names, actually, for a couple of hit men. They say they’re *novelists*, but that’s obvious bullshit. Find out what they’re really up to. They meet there practically every morning, around eleven, because this Fex is such a lazy bastard he can’t even get up at a decent hour in the morning. I want you to sit as close to them as you can. Bring that directional mic thingy if you need to. Record the whole thing. I want every scrap of information you can come up with.”

“OK, boss,” Clamface started to say, but caught himself in time. After all, he wasn’t *that* stupid.

Clamface meets Moto ...

Joseph P. Macfee (“P” for Phylo, as in “phylogenetic”) was not known as “Clamface” for nothing. At his birth, in fact, the attending physician, Jim “Tweety” Macdonald (“Tweety” because the doctor bore a strange resemblance to the cartoon character “Tweety Bird,” right down to the sparse but prominent hairs springing up from his scalp), is said to have exclaimed, “My God, (*tweet!*), it’s a boy, and he looks like a razorback clam!”

By the time the baby was hustled into the preemie incubator ward, a preposterous rumor had spread through the hospital with lightning speed—as rumors will—that a woman had “given birth to a razorback clam.” Soon a parade of nurses, orderlies, janitors, ambulance drivers, even doctors—especially doctors—had contrived deviations in their normal routines that would permit a casual stroll past the preemie viewing window where they could gawk at the so-called “preemie clam.” Of course, they all knew it was impossible for a woman to give birth to a clam. How, for example, would she have become impregnated? Unless, perhaps, she’d been swimming near the beach at low tide?

Speculation was rampant. “Looks like he come from a bloody tide-pool, ‘e does!” exclaimed one observant orderly, mop in hand, who had recently emigrated from the Isle of Wight, and knew all about tide-pools and the creatures that emerged from them.

Things at the hospital did finally calm down, but by the time Mrs. Macfee brought her little bundle-of-joy back home, Joe’s fate was settled. No one who looked at him could avoid the impression that they were looking at a clam. And so the world seemed to capitulate before this odd piece of fate, including Mrs. Macfee, who referred to him tenderly, and with not a little pride, as “my little Clamface.”

With such a unique visage, however, and the title to go with it, Joe’s career throughout his school years was anything but tender, children in schoolyards often being as cruel as concentration camp guards. The harsh treatment he received may have slowed down Joe’s rate of book learning, but it certainly sped up his developing qualities of toughness and stealth—perfect attributes that eventually caught the eye of Amazonz CEO Jee Besus, who took an instant liking to “my main man, Clamface.”

The next morning, confident that he had the full backing of one so powerful as Besus, Clamface resisted the temptation to *swagger* into the “dump” that was Tully’s, to carry out his

surveillance upon this gang of thugs led by the so-called Owl Man and Heron Man, and whose front-man was the ridiculous Fex. Instead, in a manner reminiscent of Shaman Song, Clamface *sidled* into the coffee shop, eyes darting back and forth, and quickly spotted the unruly group and its two leaders. These he easily identified by their head-gear: one wore a brown leather fisherman's or driver's cap of some sort, while the second wore a black-felt Italian beret, obviously putting on Mediterranean airs.

Clamface reached into his side pocket and palmed the miniature directional mic "thingy," as his boss had called it. At the counter, he ordered a cup of black coffee, and found an open seat close enough to the group for their voices to be within range of his "thingy." Thumbing the ON switch and pressing the RECORD button, he placed it on the table just behind his coffee cup. It looked like a 95% cacao, very-dark-chocolate candy bar, except for the faint red light glimmering on the end, which could have been written off as a marketing ploy.

Clamface settled down with a leftover newspaper and pretended to read the stock quotes in the financial section. The coffee shop clamor just added to his sense of invisibility. And he had become so skillful at spying, that his eyes could sweep a room without appearing to move, just as a ventriloquist can make his voice appear to come from somewhere else, without moving his lips.

Clamface did not realize it, but his long-term feeling of invisibility was about to prove his downfall, for he had tripped one of the filaments of the invisible, psychic safety web that Mr. Moto had spun throughout Tully's, like a paranoid, 285-lb. spider, a web woven into a virtual blanket around the group he was protecting—Foxy and her friends.

Clamface was sly, but Mr. Moto was just as sly, and shamanic to boot, in the sense that he could close his eyes and "see." Which was precisely what he was doing just as Clamface reached for his "candy bar" to adjust the input volume wheel. The movement, unnoticed by the general crowd, was like a clanging alarm to Mr. Moto's finely-tuned nervous system. And from that moment forward, Mr. Moto carried out a kind of mental "scan" of Clamface, almost a body-cavity search such as police enjoy conducting while interrogating hapless victims.

Within four minutes Mr. Moto knew all he needed to know about Clamface and the general drift of his malefic intentions. Mr. Moto quickly formulated a plan—elegant in its simplicity: Mr. Moto would remove the intruder from Tully's and, once outside, he would bind his hands with heavy-duty nylon ties, and take Clamface for a ride down to a private and rocky beach, far from any witnesses, on the upper reaches of Elliott Bay, where Mr. Moto could deal

with the finalities of his harsh trade.

Clamface did not realize that Mr. Moto was a member of the group of targets, but chose to sit apart, out of Clamface's field of view, in order to carry out his own surveillance. Thus, as Clamface fiddled again with the volume-level controls, he did not realize what was happening to him, as a pair of vise-like pincers gripped his neck and lifted him bodily from his chair and moved him toward the exit. Clamface's feet scrabbled for traction but were only scraping air, because they were three inches off the floor, so secure was Mr. Moto's grip and so great his strength. If anyone had been watching the two men move toward the door, they would have thought two old Army buddies, each on a bender, had run into each other and decided to go down the street for another drink or two.

Once outside and well past the Tully's windows, Mr. Moto expertly slipped the police-grade nylon cuffs onto Clamface's wrists, slapped some pre-cut duct tape over Clamface's mouth, then proceeded to carry him down the sidewalk like a bundle of kindling. This being Seattle, no one paid the odd couple the slightest attention.

It took less than a half-hour for Mr. Moto to reach his deserted beach and carry his squirming burden to the rocks along the shore. It was low tide, and the beach consisted of little more than rotted pilings, tide-pools and spitting clams.

It was not until two days later that newspaper headlines announced the discovery, by a pair of beachcombers, of a giant clam stuffed into a large, deep tide pool. Police spokesperson Becky Tauntler announced that there had once been a human being attached to the clam. She said investigators were asking for call-in tips from any witnesses, since all tracks—and therefore clues—had been washed away by the incoming tide. For two weeks the police switchboard was swamped with calls from concerned citizens advancing all manner of theories, mostly having to do with aliens and space-ship sightings. One caller offered to drive up from Roswell, NM and, free of charge, conduct an anti-matter sweep of the area, to clear up “once ‘n’ fer all, this UFO thang.”

Back at Amazonz headquarters, CEO Besus sat for days, immobilized in his Corinthian leather swivel chair, fingers steepled, oscillating between an autistic rage and deep remorse—rage at the dastardly perpetrators of this crime, and remorse for having sent his dear Clamface on this deadly return trip to the sea of his origins.

Besus Runs Afoul of Shaman Song...

After an appropriate, “corporate” period of mourning—i.e., not long—Jee Besus got over the death of his Security Chief Joe “Clamface” Macfee and hired a replacement. He did not go through his usual routine of reading the reams of background research his “head-hunters,” as he loved calling them, had generated for each candidate, then conducting face-to-face interviews with each person.

The fact is that Besus had had one replacement in mind all along. As a hard-headed businessman (“the biggest, baddest wolf on Wall Street,” some tritely called him), Besus also had a visionary streak. After all, who else had brainstormed into existence anything remotely close to the nearly-mythical global octopus that was *Amazonz*? It was this visionary side of Besus that had already picked Clamface’s replacement even before the buffoon Fex and his clownish puppeteers Owl Man and Heron Man had come onto the scene to challenge Amazonz’s—and therefore Besus’s personal—pre-eminence in the publishing world.

Whispers had already been circulating through the Amazonzian corridors that Clamface was a joke, however brutal he tended to be in taking care of his boss’s “problems.” He was efficient enough in that regard, everyone admitted. Apart from his face, the problem was that Clamface lacked imagination or, as those older employees—the ones who held Walt Disney in high regard and regularly compared Besus with Disney—Clamface lacked the skill of “imagineering.”

The same could not be said of his replacement, Olaf Michailovich Torochev, lately arrived from Odessa, and known to those whom he deigned to address, simply as “Micky.” If there was anything Micky did *not* lack, it was imagineering. He was constantly inventing clever new ways to dispatch his opponents, sometimes for fun, sometimes for profit. Besus recognized in Micky a fellow psychopath, though he would never put it in such blunt terms. But occasionally, when Besus and Micky would pass each other in the grand corridors of Amazonz headquarters, the two would share a brief moment of eye-contact, and Besus knew, from the slight contraction of his own pupils, that Micky was having the same experience. Thus, on a subliminal level one psychopath recognized a fellow psychopath, without their ever having to raise the terrible fact to conscious awareness. They both knew without knowing.

Their interview, therefore, was brief and jovial, full of ethnic jokes and other such coded

signals whereby each let the other know that they shared the same . . . values.

Needless to say, Mickey's first assignment was to track down Clamface's assassin and put him to rest. And while he was at it, Besus hinted, without saying so outright, he could also dispatch Owl Man and Heron Man. He didn't regard Fex as worth the trouble, so it went unspoken that, unless an opportunity presented itself, he shouldn't waste his time.

What the two psychopaths did not realize was that the path of their combined intentions would lead Mickey, the "Ogre of Odessa," straight into the target-path of Shaman Song and its equal-but-opposite direction, the two destined to collide like particles in a linear accelerator. And if they *did* collide, no one could predict—not Besus, not Torochev, not Song—how violent the explosion might be, or whether it would just be a harmless dud.

Considering the degree of malevolence on both sides, however, a great deal hung in the balance.

Moreover, a third factor had entered the equation without anyone's taking notice. It began with the fact that such concentrated malevolence rested upon a foundation of unwarranted cockiness and arrogance. Yes, the two villains were skillful, but not *that* skillful. And neither of the evil-doers was taking into account the *power of the imagination* that the two targeted novelists—Owl Man and Heron Man—might conceivably bring to bear on the entire situation. Such a form of power would be unwise to ignore, which is precisely what Micky and Song, in their presumed invulnerability, were doing.

As the two assassins set out on their fated paths, Owl Man and Heron Man were sitting at Tully's, arguing over points of grammar and style. The conflict had to do with the extent to which writers who actually knew better, should "dumb-down" their grammar and syntax to suit the sloppy modern style, thus furthering the *degradation of the language*, or whether they should hold to linguistic standards and further the *positive evolution of the language*, at the risk of alienating readers. The argument was of no immediate consequence, but at least it got their blood circulating, a practice that can be seen and heard in every neighborhood bar in Italy, where the old men gather in the mornings to argue throughout the day at full volume.

At one point, Heron Man paused, reached up, rubbed his neck and loosened his shoulders.

"Hmmm. I just got a weird feeling, like goose bumps or shivers," said Heron Man.

"Any images coming to mind?"

"Nothing clear, but it doesn't feel good, I can say that much."

“Unfamiliar?” asked Owl Man.

“Yes and no. I’ve felt things like this before, but never so intense. Something really weird is coming our way, Owl Man, and I don’t like it. I’m wondering if we need to break out the old Smith & Wessons. Or a couple of shots of Macallan—*from the cask.*”

“That bad, eh?”

“Feels like it. Wait a minute! I just saw an image of Besus’s face, frowning, and with a dark shadow behind it. Now the shadow is coming in our direction.”

“Well, it sounds like we’d better mobilize our defenses, especially since Shaman Song hasn’t made any moves lately and is therefore overdue.”

“Agreed,” replied Heron Man. “Defenses it is, then.”

And the two novelists each went home to sleep.

Their next meeting was scheduled for 7:30 AM in the morning at Tully’s, to compare dreams.

Meanwhile, Mickey left Amazonz headquarters in his high-gloss black Hummer with chrome spinner hubcaps—the Russian version of a Caddy or Maserati—with the intention of beginning his search for Clamface’s assassin with a few shots of Blavod black vodka, at the Rim of Fire, old man Ling’s real headquarters.

Mickey was unaware that at that moment Shaman Song was sitting at a corner cocktail table at the Rim of Fire, sipping hot sake. As the warm liquid slipped down his throat, he felt a different kind of heat rising. It was an apprehension, a growing awareness of an approaching threat, so he closed his eyes, which had barely been open anyway, and dropped into his “distant seeing mode.” What he saw was Mickey and his shiny black Hummer, cruising down I-5 at a leisurely 45 mph (Mickey liked people to wait for him), approaching the downtown area where the Rim of Fire was located.

In a variation on Uri Geller’s psychokinetic ability to bend spoons with concentrated mental energy, Shaman Song applied the same principle to Mickey’s right foot as he turned onto the off-ramp. In his habitual driver’s move, Mickey lifted his foot off the accelerator pedal in the Hummer and shifted it toward the adjacent brake pedal. However, the foot, instead of easing up on the gas pedal, suddenly punched the accelerator to the floor. The specially-designed, turbo-charged V-8 “hemi” engine seemed to thrill at the chance to gulp down gallons of gasoline in

seconds. By the time Mickey reached the stop-light at the bottom of the off-ramp the needle on the speedometer read 120 mph.

Entering the intersection against a red light, the Hummer smashed into the bed of a passing gravel truck that had the right-of-way, and spun it around, scattering gravel over a hundred-foot diameter, demolishing the heavy truck. The Hummer then slammed two parked hybrid Hondas out of the way, broke off two parking meters at the base, jumped the curb, slithered onto the sidewalk and finally compressed itself like an accordion against the brick wall of an old beer warehouse.

Mickey was impaled against the steering column and virtually flattened by the air-bag. Ironically, his body seemed to deflate at the same rate as the punctured air-bag.

While gaudy red-and-blue pulsars atop multiple police vehicles painted the neighborhood with a cyclonic vortex of freakish, psychedelic colors, and their sirens whooped up a kind of martial glee, inside the Rim of Fire Shaman Song took a final sip of his hot sake, left a handsome tip for the waiter, and smiled his serpentine way to the door. Now the path was cleared for a direct assault upon his lifelong enemy—Owl Man. “Vengeance is mine,” he thought to himself, having heard the quote somewhere.

At the time, Owl Man was dreaming.

Heron Man's "Defensive" Sonumai Dream ...

It was the plan of Owl Man and Heron Man to defend themselves from the “gathering darkness” Heron Man had felt—by dreaming.

As it turned out, on a night when Owl Man slumbered peacefully, Heron Man, in contrast, tussled and squirmed beneath the bedcovers. His state of mind barely qualified as sleep, let alone dreaming, but he resisted the temptation to wake up, as he doggedly tried to relax into a snore.

“Hmmpfh! Argmnp!” he muttered, throwing off the covers yet again. Then suddenly, he voiced aloud, though still sleeping, “You!”

“Yes, who else did you expect?” said a dream-voice, in the most dulcet of tones. “One of your blonde bombshells?”

“I don’t have any blonde bombshells,” replied Heron Man, annoyed.

“Oh, but you could, given half a chance.” The voice was sincere, yet mildly taunting at the same time.

“How do you know?” cried Heron Man, getting into a huff—not easy to do while sleeping.

“I know you, my dear,” said the voice, and she reached out to curl the hair above his ears—what hair there was anyway—around her dream-fingertips. “I want you to photograph me,” she said.

“Photograph?” said Heron Man, wrinkling his dream-brow. “But why?”

“It will help.”

“Help what?” Heron Man mumbled.

“You’ll see.”

Heron Man had dreamed of this woman before, and he knew her name: Sonumai. Whenever she appeared, she was always so keenly aware, her pronunciation so uncannily precise, that Heron Man would never write her off as a nondescript figure in a routine dream. Naturally, any attempt at “explaining” her, glib or serious, would escape him—not that he would even try.

Instead, he tried to focus all the more intently on the image before him. This dream-visitor, this “Sonumai,” was a slender Japanese woman in her mid-to-late-30s, dressed in a sumptuous, well-cut, cream-colored silk kimono with dark-brown lapels. The back panel of the

kimono featured a little green heron perched on a bamboo spear over a pond, rendered in delicate *sumi-e* brushwork. She was frankly beautiful, with gorgeous long, silky black hair, luminous dark eyes and a subtle hint of what appeared to be red lip-gloss.

Though still wafting through the dream-state, Heron Man knew that he was in over his head. He had no idea who she *was*, what she wanted to do *with* him, what she could do *for* him, let alone what she might want to do *to* him. And least of all did he know what he could do *for her*. He only knew that when she spoke, he obeyed. Suddenly overcome by an obscure literary reference— an unusual occurrence for a dream—he realized she resembled the main character in Rider Haggard’s novel *She*—the figure they called, “She who must be obeyed.”

“Take some photographs of me,” she said. And so he did, insofar as one can take a photograph in a dream.

His own shiny digital camera materialized in his hands and he began framing, composing and exposing—if that is the word—photographs of this beautiful dream-woman. Over and over, she smiled at him. After he had compiled at least fifty or sixty “shots”—many of them creditable photos in his view—she said, “OK, Heron Man, that’s enough,” bringing the dream-photo-shoot to a close.

“Now,” she said, “I want you to make prints of all of these photos and take them to the Rim of Fire, and leave two or three of them on each of the cocktail tables. Then call Shaman Song on his cell phone, and tell him that there is a present for him at the restaurant from his “most desirable Sonumai.” Say it exactly that way: ‘most desirable So-nu-mai,’” and she pronounced the name very carefully. “The name is most important.”

“Then I want you to call your Mr. Moto to the Rim of Fire to pick up the pieces—what’s left of Shaman Song.”

Heron Man tried to extract a few more clarifying details from Sonumai, but by that time she had faded and he was having trouble remembering even this much.

Tossing the bedcovers aside, he grabbed his note-pad and pencil and began scribbling as fast as possible. No sooner had he written what he could recall of the dream than he dropped the notebook onto the nightstand and speed-dialed Owl Man’s number.

Heron Man listened in a fit of impatience to the lethargic tinkling of the phone by Owl Man’s bed.

Heron Man Tells Owl Man about His “Sonumai” Dream ...

After Heron Man’s dream of Sonumai, with her explicit instructions about dealing with Shaman Song, the fact that Owl Man did not answer the phone right away couldn’t have come at a worse time.

“Come on, dammit, answer the phone!” muttered Heron Man, but he knew it was for naught. If Owl Man hadn’t answered by now, most likely he was *not going* to answer it until he was good and ready—assuming that Shaman Song hadn’t put him in *whiteout* again.

Heron Man was about to slam down the phone when a voice came on:

“Hello? Heron Man? Is that you?” said Owl Man, in the most relaxed way.

“Why, yes, it is I, Owl Man,” said Heron Man, sounding the way a horse might sound with a bit chafing its mouth. “Were you going to answer some time this century?”

Usually Heron Man was relaxed and even-tempered, but after his Sonumai dream he was definitely on edge. The gist of his report to Owl Man was to “hold everything” for the time being, including the I Ching’s hint about “Returning” that Owl Man had discussed with Helen. Heron Man needed to carry out an experiment, he told the Owl, and he didn’t know how long it was going to take.

“Things are taking an unexpected turn, Owl Man—*really unexpected*—and there’s no telling where they will end up, or when that will be.”

“Sounds like you’ve been dreaming, Heron,” said the Owl.

“I have. And an unanticipated element—a person, actually—has entered the picture.”

Heron Man proceeded to tell Owl Man about his strange dream-conversation with Sonumai and her very precise instructions with respect to Shaman Song.

After hearing the story, Owl Man agreed that, for now at least, Sonumai’s sudden intervention would have to take precedence over Owl Man’s return to the Rim of Fire.

“First things first,” he said. “Let’s see what Sonumai has in store for our friend, Shaman Song. There’s no question that you must carry out those instructions to the letter.”

They talked quietly for a little longer, mostly discussing how dreams relativize our sense of “reality,” and some of the implications of I Ching hexagrams. Then they rang off.

At the moment, there was nothing else for Heron Man to do than to begin making

preparations to carry out Sonumai's instructions. He would find out whether or not this mysterious dream figure—Sonumai—really did have some spooky advantage over Shaman Song. She herself seemed to have no doubt about the matter.

Song Sees Sonumai's Image ...

With nothing more than a dream to go on, then, Heron Man girded his loins and dialed Shaman Song's cell phone. He'd gotten the number from the bored bartender at the Rim of Fire, in exchange for five bucks.

When Song answered the call, he was 2.5 miles away from the Rim of Fire, outside an all-night Korean convenience market where he had bought a hard-pack of Marlboro cigarettes and some spicy *kim-chee* about to explode in its tightly-lidded jar. The small device jumped and jangled in Song's pocket. His personal ring-tone was an up-tempo version of "Dixie"—his idea, along with the Marlboros, of assimilation into American culture.

"Yeah, what want?" Song shouted into the hand-piece.

"Song?" a voice said commandingly.

"Yeah? Who call?" Song did not take lightly to frivolous solicitations of his time. Since he did not recognize the voice, however, but *did* recognize the ring of authority in it, he considered the possibility that it might be Old Man Ling calling, who had a penchant for affecting false voices to fool his underlings into blunders of one sort or another.

Song decided to moderate his approach, just in case.

"Yes, this Shaman Song. How I he'p you?"

The voice on the other end was unrelenting.

"Get your ass back here to the Rim of Fire, Song, and take a look at what's all over the cocktail tables, or prepare to get your ass kicked all the way back to Huang-shi in a hand-cart," said the still-unidentified voice. The speaker was uncertain about the exact, correct usage of the metaphor, but brazened it out anyway.

"I be there five minute," said Song, taking no chances.

Earlier, Heron Man had taken the photos he found registered in his digital camera upon waking from the Sonumai dream, loaded them into his computer and printed them out. Unfortunately—or fortunately, Heron Man was not sure—the photos were all unintelligible blurs, to him at least.

But who was he to argue with Sonumai? He spent a few minutes staring at the prints, trying to see through the pixels to any patterns that might be lurking in or behind them, but he soon gave up. They were nothing but fogged, washed-out throwaway shots, as far as Heron Man

could tell.

Still following Sonumai's orders, though, Heron Man made his way post-haste to the Rim of Fire. Song had just left. No one offered resistance to Heron Man's presence there—not even the bodyguards upstairs who had abandoned their security monitors in favor of a Chinese card game. Old Man Ling, suffering from acid reflux, had retired to the couch in his private office.

It was a slow night and the bored staff tried to busy themselves with sweeping the floor, busing tables and such things. Since Heron Man was obviously not going to be spending much if any money there, let alone leaving any heavy tips, they just ignored him, so he was able to move freely among the tables leaving his—or Sonumai's—blurred prints on each cocktail tabletop.

Then he made his phone call to Song, went to the bar and, finally getting the bartender's attention again by waving another bill in the air, he ordered a drink. He sat, sipped and waited for the return of Shaman Song.

A few minutes later, Heron Man heard the shrieking of rubber tires sliding to a halt, the sound of a car door slamming, and the heavy glass door of the Rim of Fire swinging open and curiously light-footed steps approaching. It was as if Tinker-Belle were in a hurry but had stopped by for a night-cap.

“Who want Song?” shouted the agitated shaman, normally so serene.

“Look around, butt-face,” said Heron Man sarcastically, pushing his luck, for he knew that Shaman Song was no patsy. Song was about to deliver a round-house cartwheeling series of kicks to the face of this wise-guy, whom he now recognized as Heron Man, when he pulled up short and, instead, began looking at the blurred photographs laid out on the cocktail tables.

“What?” cried Song. “Who this?”

“That's right, idiot,” said Heron Man calmly, still pushing his luck. “You know who it is. A certain woman.”

At this, Shaman Song bent forward at the waist and squinted as he examined several of the blurred photos. His eyebrows began wriggling like agitated snakes, and his mouth opened wide, but no sound emerged. He looked like a granite cliff-face covered with snakes slithering above a deep cave.

“Wha—? Who?”

“That's right, Shaman Song. You know very well who that is. Oh, and she told me to give you a message. She said, ‘Tell him that these are a present from his *most desirable Sonumai*.’ She

wanted me to say it exactly that way: ‘most desirable Sonumai.’”

Song’s face wrinkled until he began to resemble a toad or iguana—something reptilian anyway. His eyebrows scrunched, his mouth pulled down into a deep frown, his lips were practically flapping—for in these otherwise undecipherable photos Song was being confronted with his biggest weakness. This was not just a *woman*, any number of which he could throw away like playthings—*cosa de juguete*, as the Spanish say. No, this was something far more powerful. This was none other than ... the very *Sonumai* herself. He could barely utter the name without his knees buckling.

“Where you get—” he started to say, but then just began blubbing again.

For all his animosity toward the evil Shaman Song, Heron Man later admitted that he was actually beginning to feel a twinge of sympathy for the villain, to see such a supreme sociopath reduced in this manner by—by what?—by a bunch of blurred digital photos.

Heron Man took out his cell phone again and, still following Sonumai’s dream instructions, dialed Mr. Moto.

Mr. Moto Picks Up the Pieces ...

Sonumai had been very explicit about the importance of calling Mr. Moto. Maybe it was like fixing the photographic image on an old-fashioned darkroom print—timing was crucial lest the image be lost. What the Heron really wanted to do was to rush over to Jasmine’s apartment and discuss this strange incident, at length and over a few jiggers of Macallan, with Owl Man. But that would have to wait.

Three buzzes later, Moto answered in his curt way.

“Moto.” That was all the answer Mr. Moto ever gave. That’s about all he *ever* said, actually. Mr. Moto was all about *action*, as anyone who had ever spent time around him could verify.

“Mr. Moto, it’s Heron Man. Listen, I need your help. I’m at the Rim of Fire and I need you to come here and “pick up the pieces of Shaman Song.” Heron Man was using Sonumai’s terminology.

“Moto need Foxy’s tommy gun?”

“No, I don’t think you’ll need any weapon at all, Mr. Moto. It looks to me like Shaman Song has gone completely bonkers.”

“Bonk—what?” Moto was uncertain as to the term.

“Bonkers. It means I think he’s gone crazy. He won’t be any trouble, I’m pretty sure. But I have received instructions from a dream-source to have *you* take him away.”

“Be there soon,” said Mr. Moto, and rang off.

Heron Man was sure that Shaman Song’s days of inflicting damage on others were over. This malevolent enemy, who had spent so many years plotting against Owl Man and, by extension, Heron Man as well, was just sitting at one of the cocktail tables staring blankly at the blurred print of the Sonumai photo. He kept repeating the same phrase she told Heron Man in the dream to use: “Most desirable Sonumai, most desirable Sonumai, most desirable Sonumai”—on and on and on. It seemed as though his imagination, which previously had wings and could fly anywhere, had been smoked over a fire by a South Seas head-hunter and reduced to the size of a walnut. Whatever hold the beautiful Sonumai wielded over the arrogant shaman was far more powerful than all his shamanic tricks put together. Heron Man briefly thought of the biblical story of Samson and Delilah—Sonumai, in the role of Delilah, had “sheared the locks” of

Shaman Song, the Chinese Samson, so to speak, emptying him of his power.

Once Mr. Moto arrived at the Rim of Fire and saw the pathetic Song blubbering over the blurry photo, he looked at Heron Man and just shook his head.

“What you want me do with him?” said Mr. Moto.

“Well,” said Heron Man, “he’s longer any danger to us, so we just need to ‘re-locate’ him the way you might re-locate a rattlesnake who has crawled by accident into your back yard.”

Heron Man thought for a moment.

“Hmmm, that’s an interesting metaphor. OK. Here’s an idea that might just work. Mr. Moto, I want you to take what’s left of Shaman Song here and drive him over the mountains, out into the high desert, by the salt lakes. Let him take *one* of these photos with him, but just one. And if he gives you any trouble on the way, just bonk him on the head and give me a call.”

“Got it,” said Moto.

“Ten miles after you’re out of the mountains,” continued Heron Man, “there’s a roadside attraction place out there. They call it the ‘High Desert Rattlesnake Farm.’ You can’t miss it. Take him inside, let him look around, and see how he responds. If he likes it, just leave him there. He’ll make out OK. It’s where he belongs, really. So, if things go well, you can just drive back alone, but call me when you’re back on this side of the mountains.”

Mr. Moto asked a couple of clarifying questions, and soon he was walking out of the Rim of Fire with Shaman Song slung over his shoulder like a duffle bag.

While Mr. Moto dealt with the remains of Shaman Song, Heron Man gathered up all the remaining photo prints of Sonumai. Then he placed another call to Owl Man, who answered on the first ring-tone.

Mr. Moto made good time driving through the mountain pass in sparse traffic and, once he was out in the sage brush, rock outcroppings and dry lakes, he soon came upon the High Desert Rattlesnake Farm Heron Man had referred to:

**BIGGEST RATTLERS IN THE WEST! HANDLE ‘EM IF YOU CAN!’ BABY
RATTLERS FOR SALE! RATTLESNAKE TACOS \$4.50 EA. GRILLED RATTLER!
RATTLESNAKE JERKY—CHEAP!**

The signs went on in this fashion for a mile preceding the actual facility, which consisted of little more than a dirt parking lot with stones painted white for a border, a corrugated iron shed, some chain link fence, and a slew of dirty glass aquariums and other forms of glassed-in

cages.

Inside the building the proprietor sat watching a game show on an old TV in a corner.

CAUTION! DANGER! POISON! The signs continued into the building, like crude enticements at a carnival, which this was in a sense. It was all about meat—rattlesnake meat—and the things that could be done to it.

Mr. Moto had to lift Shaman Song out of the passenger seat of the car, and Song staggered toward the building, but with a strange quickening of pulse and pace. Most of the rattlers seemed to be asleep, but their very proximity seemed to wake up Shaman Song.

“Hmmm, what smell so good?” he said to nobody in particular.

The proprietor, however, heard the comment and bellowed out from his corner, “That there’s rattlesnake meat. Just cooked some up. Want some?”

“Real snake?” asked Song.

“Yer damn right it’s real. It’ll bite yer pecker off if ya let it. Tastes just like chicken too, when ya eat it.”

While Mr. Moto stood by watching, Song sat down with the proprietor and the two of them shared several rattler shish-ka-bobs and a beer. When Song tried to pay the proprietor, Jake, he refused to take any money.

“You seem like somebody who gets along real good with snakes, am I right?”

“Oh, Shaman Song love snakes, bigger is better.”

“Hell, I got some big’uns out back look like gaters they’re so big. Wanna see?”

“Oh, yes.” Song was in heaven.

“Say, listen, you ever *handle* a rattler before?”

“Me? Handle snake? Plenty time. Song *talk to snake, know snake-talk.*”

“Is that a fact? Well, I’ll be damned. Last helper I had out here got bit and run off. Say, you wouldn’t be interested in working here once in a while, wouldya?”

“You gimme snake. Song take and hold.”

“Well, OK, then, let’s just try it. Worst kin happen is you get a little nip. Don’t hurt much, if you don’t panic.”

Before Mr. Moto realized what was happening, Shaman Song was inside the big pen, a round enclosure with panes of glass surrounding it to keep the snakes in. There were about fifty rattlers of different sizes. First he started picking them up and nuzzling them. Then they all

seemed to crawl in his direction and he knelt among them and very carefully lay down on his back in a clear spot and stayed very still while the rattlesnakes crawled all over him. They seemed to respond to his warmth, and were both enlivened and relaxed at the same time.

“Well, I never seen anything like that,” cried Jake. “Mister, if yer willing to do that every afternoon, ‘cept Sundays, a course, and maybe twice a day on Saturdays, you got yourself a job, and a damn good one!”

Mr. Moto realized that *this* was the possibility that Heron Man had visualized—a kind of reptile heaven that Shaman Song would never leave, so entranced would he be by the reptiles’ primitive energy and their unblinking gaze.

When Heron Man’s phone rang he leapt to answer it and shouted, “How did it go?”

Mr. Moto replied cryptically, “Snake eyes,” a phrase he’d learned from Foxy.

Owl Man had also been waiting for the news. When it finally came and Heron Man had told him the whole story, he only said, in his understated way, “Well done, Heron Man.”

The Ladies' Auxiliary ...

“Helen? It’s Jasmine. I just heard from Heather and she’s hysterical. Apparently Fex has totally fucked up all of the plans Owl Man and Heron Man have been working on. The whole plot, according to Heather, has been demolished. And to make it worse, she thinks Fex is in deep trouble with Old Man Ling. Are you in a position to meet me again at the tea shop today?”

“Hmm, sounds too serious, Jaz. Let’s skip the tearoom today and meet at The Galahad, on Fifth. We’ll have a couple of shots of Lagavulin, like Owl Man and Heron Man do when things are tough. They call those shots “stiffeners.” Sounds like we’re going to need some masculine stiffening of our own.”

Two hours later, at the swanky Galahad on Fifth Avenue, a few blocks over from Tully’s, Jasmine and Helen had already knocked down the first shot of Lagavulin and put their heads together. Jasmine was bringing Helen up to speed, as much as she was able, over Fex’s trouble with Old Man Ling.

“Apparently he signed a *contract* with Old Man Ling, if you can believe that. How stupid can a person be? I mean, Fex is lovable in a way, because he’s really just a big blowhard but never hurts anybody, and Heather is crazy about him. But I think he may have opened his big mouth too far this time.”

“Well, from what you’ve said, Jaz, it certainly sounds like it. Can you give me some more details about this so-called ‘*contract*’?”

“I don’t know all the details, but here’s one choice tidbit. Somewhere in there it says that if Fex fails to fulfill some condition or other “as stipulated herein,” Fex agrees to turn over the legal title to the *Come Ye Heather* to Ling Enterprises Inc. In other words, Fex and Heather would be out on the street, and Old Man Ling would own Fex’s houseboat outright! I just can’t believe it! Why would Fex sign such a thing?”

“Hmmm. No wonder Heather was so upset. Well, there was obviously a way *into* this mess, so there must be some way *out* of it. We just have to find it.”

“I hope you have some ideas, Helen. I can’t think of anything that doesn’t sound like the stupid plot to some old shoot-‘em-up Western movie with Randolph Scott and Shelly Winters.”

“Well, nothing comes to mind at the—wait a minute, Jaz. I’m getting an idea.”

Jasmine sat and watched as Helen closed her eyes and wrinkled her brow, deep in

concentration.

Then Helen laughed out loud.

“Oh my, this is rich! I actually think I’m getting some kind of “transmission” from Owl Man and Heron Man, without their even being aware of it. I call it ‘back door communications.’ One person (or more) communicates with another, but entirely through the unconscious. That’s really what “muses” do anyway, isn’t it? Communicate through the back door? Telling the other person what they already know?”

“I don’t know, Helen, you’re the expert there. You tell me.”

“The answer, Jaz, is ‘Yes.’ Now let’s have another shot of Lagavulin.”

Helen nodded to the waiter and pointed to their glasses. Seconds later their lead-crystal glasses were brimming with more of the golden liquid. As they smelled the aroma and sipped the ambrosia, they both felt like lightning was shooting through their brains.

“OK, it’s coming clearer now. I’ll try to make this brief. Here’s what’s going to happen. You and I are going to get dressed up in the morning and make a visit to Ling Bank. It will be Thursday morning and Ling is sure to be there. It’s a big counting day before the Friday afternoon paycheck fiesta. The Three B’s: Busy banking business.”

The Lagavulin was affecting the linguistic centers of Helen’s brain.

“What? You and I are going into Ling Bank?”

“Of course, what could be more natural? Two well-dressed women wish to speak to the President of the Bank—not the manager, not Jolene—they wish to speak only to the President. Do you see how, already, a certain atmosphere is coalescing?”

“What I see is that I’d better powder my nose before you go any further.”

Five minutes later Jasmine was back and Helen was scribbling some notes on a small pad with a black-and-gold pencil.

It took a total of three shots each of Lagavulin to do the trick, but at the end they had their plan and decided to go to Captain Jack’s for dinner—to celebrate.

The next morning Helen picked up Jasmine in a taxi. They were both dressed to the hilt. Jasmine had picked up some of the introduction cards Heather was supposed to use during the actual heist, the ones that read *Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Rensselaer*, to use when she—Heather—was going to play the role of a haughty aristocrat. Jasmine had several for Helen.

“Perfect,” said Helen. “Now I’m the Baroness.” Then she said, “Driver. Ling Bank, if you

please.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the taxi driver said emphatically, getting into the act without realizing it.

When they arrived, there weren’t many customers in the bank. Jolene was in her office talking on the phone. Sal was busy punching his computer keyboard. They were the only two who stood a chance of recognizing the two elegant members of this “boarding party.” Helen walked directly up to Old Joe the Security Guard, who was examining the polished toes of his police-grade leather shoes, and presented her card.

“My good man, would you be so kind as to deliver my card to the Bank President? I emphasize, it is the President I require, not the Manager or any lesser agents.”

This was the first time in Joe’s entire security career he’d been approached by a real aristocrat, a Baroness, and he didn’t really know what to say or almost how to talk.

“Uh, sure, yeah, I mean, uh, yes, ma’am, uh, ah’d be glad ta take yer card upstairs to the boss—”

“To the President, sir,” corrected Baroness Van Rensselaer.

“Uh, yeah, yes, ma’am, to the President of this-here bank.”

“Institution,” corrected the Baroness once again.

“That’s whut ah meant, uh, the institu-tu-tion.” Now poor Joe was starting to stutter.

“Thank you, sir,” said the Baroness, and she offered her gloved hand as if in recompense for his troubles.

Minutes later Joe returned, practically falling over himself to escort the two ladies into the elevator and up to Old Man Ling’s office. Even the bodyguards were on the alert, acting with a modicum of *politesse*, as the Baroness herself would have said.

“My dear Baroness,” said Ling effusively, holding out his hand with tobacco-stained fingernails, even bowing, which, though it was an ancient Asian tradition, was something that Old Man Ling had long since gotten over.

“How I be of service to you today? Would you like tea?” He clapped his hands sharply and one of the bodyguards hustled out to rustle up the tea service. When Ling turned back to the Baroness, he was utterly lubricious.

“It be my greatest honor and pri-lege to serve you.”

“First, let me introduce to you my companion, Miss Lotus Blossom, a professional stage-name, of course, but I’m sure you understand. It is necessary, at times, to travel, how do you say

it—*huà míng de*—incognito.”

“Oh, yes, yes, Ling understand complete. Very important. Ling also travel *huà míng de*. All time.”

“That’s wonderful. Then I see we understand each other, about the need for privacy.”

“No worry—” and Ling looked at the card again, “Miss V-Van, ah, Rena-sa—”

“Van Rensellaer.”

“Of course,” and Ling bowed deeply.

Just then the oak-necked bodyguard brought the tea service and the real business at hand was postponed for a few minutes over pleasantries, at which Ling was not the most expert. For her part, Jasmine was silent, but in a supercilious way.

Once the pleasantries were over, the Baroness got right to the point.

“I’ll not waste any more of your precious time, Mr. Ling. I am looking for a series of trustworthy banks where I can place some of my assets in a ... well-distributed manner. You notice I used the word “trustworthy.” Do you know what that means, Mr. Ling, with your limited English?” The Baroness was not one to mince words when business was at hand.

“Ling most trustworthy bank in America,” said Ling proudly, even hurt, as if his pride had been stung.

“*All of America?*” asked the Baroness.

“Well, maybe Seattle, America,” said Ling, backing up a bit now for the first time in his life.

“I see.”

Ling was baffled, and more than a little nervous.

“Well, then, perhaps you can explain to me how this particular contract came into existence?” At this, the Baroness opened her small handbag and withdrew a folded copy of the contract Fex had signed. She unfolded it and pushed it across the desk to Ling.

He opened it and read it.

Had there been a camera in the room, recording the emotions flitting across Ling’s face, a graduate-studies program in the Stanislavski method could have been inaugurated anywhere in the country, based on those filmed results.

Ling was groping for words, but the Baroness gave him no quarter.

“Yes, Mr. Ling. What you have in your hands is exactly the same contract you extorted

from someone who happens to be a very dear friend of mine—he goes by the name of “Fex.” In fact, we spend every season together in the Riviera. But the European *paparazzi* pester him so much when he is on the Continent that he spends most of the year in Seattle, as do I, for a little peace of mind. He lives quietly on a little houseboat. I believe the name, in fact, appears in this despicable, so-called “contract.” Yes, here it is: the *Come Ye Heather*. I have reason to believe that this contract is completely fraudulent and, if exposed to either the authorities or the press, could lead to the closure of this bank and even, in fact, to the closure of all related interests of ‘Ling Enterprises Inc.,’ as it says here at the bottom.”

This was far more than Old Man Ling was prepared to deal with. He had never done business with a Baroness before, and was far more comfortable with haggling over prices of bales of various illegal or quasi-legal goods. Besides, he had no way in the world of knowing whether she could make good on her threats or not. But, judging from her bearing, he could not afford to doubt it.

“Oh, you make big mistake, Baroness,” said Ling. “This no contract. This big joke. Fex my friend. I try fool him, make laugh. Big joke.” And he took the contract in his hands and tore it into pieces, dropped them into his glass ash tray, pulled out his polished-stainless lighter and ignited the entire pile.

The pieces of paper burst into flames between them as Ling smiled at the Baroness in the most ingratiating manner. In the meantime, she looked him directly in the eye in a blatant form of intimidation—what the academic psychologists call “non-verbal communication.” Instead of returning her challenge, Ling averted his gaze and stared dully at the fiery papers curling and the ashes forming. He was beaten and he knew it. All he wanted at this point was for the Baroness and her “companion” to exit the bank as quickly as possible and never come back.

“Well,” said the Baroness, “I’m beginning to think we understand each other.”

Ling said nothing, but bowed his head as if offering it to the sword of his liege.

“I and my associates will be watching the situation closely, Mr. Ling. It will be my decision, of course, which course of action to pursue. But in the end, that really depends on you, doesn’t it?” The Baroness smiled.

Ling bowed his head again, then shouted a curt order to Oak-Neck to show them out of the office and, hopefully, out of the bank—and his life—forever.

Old Joe the Security Guard took off his hat as they walked past in the most regal manner,

but he couldn't figure out why Oak-Neck was escorting them so politely. Usually Oak-Neck was the one who threw people out on the sidewalk.

“Oh, well,” he said, as he unwrapped his bologna sandwich and began to eat his lunch.

Sally's Tears ...

Sal knew that the story about the “software problem” he and Jolene had been working on after hours, which is what he’d been telling Sally, was like a bucket with a leak that just kept getting bigger and bigger. He could tell it was leaking by the icy silences emanating from Sally whenever he came home. Sometimes she would be sitting in the corner of the couch, legs drawn up, hugging a pillow to her lap, staring at the TV, flipping the remote from one channel to another. Other times she would be lying in bed, turned toward the wall with the covers pulled over her ears.

“Hey, Sals, what’s up?” Sal would say tentatively, hoping to budge her from the foxhole she had been digging for herself. It was a form of security, of course, just short of sucking her thumb.

At best, she would reply with a curt, “Mmph,” or she would emit a long sigh, apropos of nothing. Once she screamed at him unintelligibly and threw a saucer at the refrigerator.

“Tonight,” Sal said to himself while driving home, “I gotta tell her the truth, but how?”

Approaching the front door, he reached for the knob as if it were a live fuse on the tip of an unexploded five-hundred-pound bomb.

He opened the door a crack and stuck his head just inside. “Sals? You home, babe?”

He heard some kind of noise in the bedroom at the back of the house. It sounded like squirrels building an attic-nest or cats tearing up furniture.

“Sals? Is that you?” The eerie sound was giving Sal goose-bumps.

Finally he discerned a murmuring snuffle, then a barely suppressed cry, followed by an explosive howl. Sal recognized Sally’s voice and ran into the bedroom where he slid to a stop just before cracking his shins on the bed-frame. Sally was sitting on the bed, on top of three pillows, screaming into her cell-phone, tears spilling from her eyes as if from a flower-garden watering can.

“You can’t mean it! It’s impossible,” she was yelling.

“Hey, Sals, hey—” whispered Sal gently, in an effort to quell the storm.

Sally held out her hand like a traffic cop, shaking her head at Sal. She was listening to her phone with the intensity of someone about to crack the Enigma code.

“I don’t believe it, Heather! It sounds like a bad joke! Those creepy bastards!” Sally was

toggling between tears and rage.

When Sal saw that Sally was not being strangled by a serial killer, he decided that, if only for tonight, it would be the better part of valor for him to postpone his confession. So he tiptoed backwards, out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where he poured himself a stiff drink.

Ten minutes later Sally came shuffling into the kitchen in her slippers. Sal was red-faced, because he was working on his third drink. Sally was red-faced as well, but for different reasons. Her eyes were bulging like those of a National Geographic rain-forest lizard. She held a hanky to her nose and puffed at it, though the drainage had pretty much stopped.

When she finally looked at Sal, it seemed to him that she didn't recognize him.

"Hey, Sals, it's me. Sal. What's goin' on?"

"Sal, you're not going to believe what happened." And the story poured forth from Sally's swollen lips in a torrent—all about how Fex was kidnapped by robbers and they were going to blow up the houseboat and Heather and Fex would have to move in with Coo, or else stay at the YMCA, if they didn't kill Fex first like they threatened to do, and Heather too, and would Sally please scatter Heather's ashes from one of the rides at the Seattle Center where she and Fexie met and also scatter Fex's ashes down by the parking lot of that place where they won the dance contest doin' the Mashed Potato and ... and ... "

As Sally ran out of steam, she just sniffed a little, then grabbed Sal's glass and glugged the remainder of the booze that was in it. She looked around the kitchen in a daze, as if she had never been there before. Then she looked at Sal and said:

"Where've you been, Sal?"

"Oh, you know, had to work late at the bank on that software problem Jolene and I been dealin' with." There it went, another lost opportunity to tell Sally the truth. Maybe tomorrow, Sal thought.

"But what's this business with Fex 'n' Heather and the YMCA? Ain't that for *young Christian men*?" said Sal.

"How should I know, Sal? I'm just tellin' you what Heather told me."

While Sal was trying to unravel the tangled skein of the account Sally had blurted out, her cell phone rang again. She ran into the bedroom to get the call, yelling out to Sal: "It's Heather again!"

Sal fixed Drink Number Four and plopped himself down on the couch.

This time there was no shouting or screaming from the bedroom, only quiet whispers.

When Sally came out this time she dropped the cell phone on the coffee table, grabbed Sal's glass again and emptied it.

"Ya want me to get you a drink, Sals?"

"Yeah," said Sally. "Make it a double."

By the time Sal came back he was weaving a little bit. He gave Sally her glass. She sipped it a few times then gave out a long sigh.

"It's over. Helen and Jasmine fixed it."

"Fixed what?" said Sal, his voice had deepened from the booze and now was quavering because he was starting to get upset. "What the hell's going on, Sally? I don't get nothin' about what you're sayin'. Who, what, where, when, why?"

"Don't forget how."

"OK. How, too. Just tell me."

The story Sal got this time around was a little simpler and easier to follow than the first one when Sal came home. Easier perhaps because it involved the *story*, the *drama*, that Sally and Heather were supposed to enact during the heist—about Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Rensselaer and her companion walking into Ling Bank. Sally had practiced saying that fancy name many times since it had first come up.

The gist of Sally's new report was that Old Man Ling tricked Fex into signing a contract that—among who-knows-what-other-things—would have given the houseboat, free and clear, to Ling. But when Heather told Helen and Jasmine about it, it turned out they dressed up and went straight to the bank, where Helen played the Baroness [Heather's part] and Jasmine played her companion [Sally's part]. So the two of them "walked right into Ling Bank and scared the pants off Old Man Ling" [Heather's expression] and got him to tear up the contract.

"Scared the shit out of him, according to Heather—pardon my French."

Sal was perplexed. "You mean, Helen and Jasmine were in the bank lobby and I didn't know it?"

"That's right, Sal. You must have had your head up where it don't belong." Sally was feeling the effects of the whiskey Sal had brought her. As Sally got more light-headed, Sal began sinking into a gloomier mood, as he considered the possible consequences of humiliating Old Man Ling. Sal just knew that heads were going to roll, and that they could be anybody's heads,

rolling in any direction.

“Oh boy, Sals. I think there may be some repercussions.”

“Reper— what?”

“That means *bad stuff* comin’ down the pike. Do Owl Man and Heron Man know about this?”

“How should I know?”

“We gotta find out somehow. I don’t even know where they are, or where they been. Maybe they can fix this with their novel-writin’ gimmick. Make it go away somehow.”

“I don’t know, Sal. Do you think we’re all in trouble?”

“Yeah, Sals. I think we’re all in big trouble. It’s great that Helen and Jaz pulled off that riff and got Fex off the hook—for now. But who knows what’s gonna happen next? Could be deep doo-doo. And the only ones who can fix it for good are Owl Man and Heron Man. Why don’t you call Jasmine—you get along a lot better with her than I do—and see if she knows—”

“Thash not true, Shal!” Sally was slurring now, having taken umbrage at what Sal had just said. “She likesh you a lot!”

“Never mind, Sals. Just call her. We gotta get in touch with the genius bird-brains.”

So Sally took the cell phone back into the bedroom and closed the door. She didn’t come out for at least an hour.

The Aftermath ...

It only took a few seconds.

In fact, Old Joe hadn't even finished chewing the first bite of his bologna sandwich when it dawned on him that something was amiss.

"Now wait a danged minute here," he said, then swallowed the mouthful of bologna and white bread. "I ain't never seen nothin' like that b'fore"—referring to the deferential demeanor of Oak-Neck—"Baroness or no Baroness."

So, true to his profession as Security Guard, Joe put business before pleasure. He re-wrapped the bologna sandwich in its waxed paper and put it back in the corner where he was accustomed to hiding it. Then he slid off his stool and began following the odd group—the Baroness, her Companion and a very chastened Oak-Neck—at a discreet distance. He intended to see just what was going on.

But his job depended on not drawing too much attention to himself. So he walked a few feet behind the group, nice and easy, like they said.

That's what they taught everyone at the "Security College" he'd attended—a two-week course that issued a diploma at the end:

"Just try to blend in," the instructor had said. "Just act natural, like you're a customer waiting for his grandmother, stuff like that. Don't go hoppin' around like Jiminy Cricket. Be real smooth. Walk slow and casual. People won't wanna put their money in a bank if yer jumpin' up and down all the time. And don't go flashin' your gun at nobody, even if yer just playin' with it. You'll scare the regular customers. Wait'll you get a real perp and they make their move, *then* pull out your weapon." The trainers liked using words like "weapon," "perpetrator" and "motor vehicle."

Joe slid behind the potted palm just inside the glass doors. From this vantage point, he watched Oak-Neck wave down a taxi and hold the door open for the elegant ladies.

"Well, looks OK so far. Whatta *you* think?" said Joe, speaking to the palm tree. He was of the belief that plants grew faster if you talked to them, especially if you asked for their opinion. He looked back outside just as the taxi door closed, the driver sped off, and Oak-Neck turned to walk back into the bank. Joe quickly slipped out from behind the palm and back onto the floor, re-adopting the slow stroll he was taught, as if he'd been there all along.

Not long after the elevator had conveyed Oak-Neck back up to Ling's office, however, there was a tremendous series of crashes, thumps and cracking sounds overhead—no gunshots, but violence nonetheless. A ragged voice emitted a stream of what had to be Chinese invectives, non-stop, for about five minutes. Then Joe heard the sounds of a plate-glass window shattering, followed by 1/4-in. thick chunks of broken safety-glass falling on the tops of cars in the parking lot out back, and splintering on the asphalt.

“Holy Mother of God!” cried out Joe, who was piously inclined. He was not inclined, however, to rush upstairs and deal with whatever violent disturbance had just taken place in Ling's office, normally so quiet. Putting two and two together, he realized there had to be some connection between Oak-Neck's odd behavior and what must have been Old Man Ling's volcanic eruption.

“I ain't goin' up there,” he said aloud. Then again, “I ain't goin' up there. They don't pay me enough fer that. Hell, I'll take over Manny's job down t' the bowlin' alley 'fore I'll go upstairs.”

All the normal activity of the bank had come to an abrupt halt with the ruckus overhead. Sal had stopped punching his keyboard. Jolene had hung up the phone and was staring with trepidation at the ceiling. What customers there were, looked like frozen Ice Age mummies just pulled out of a melting glacier.

Joe calmly walked into his corner, grabbed his sandwich in its waxed-paper wrapping, then walked into the middle of the floor and stopped. He looked over at Jolene and shouted to her:

“Dang it, Jolene. You take care of it. Ah quit! You can have this shit job,” then less loudly, “but please send mah pay check to me in the mail.” And with that, Old Joe left Ling Bank forever.

It was only many hours later that the police and the SWAT team had finished their work upstairs. Jolene didn't get home until 2:00 AM; Sal, not until twenty minutes later.